Automation Anxiety Workshop:

'Human (In)Security'

UWE Bristol, 11 April 2017

The Sex of Drones

Professor Benjamin Noys, University of Chichester

Abstract

It might be obvious to assume that the sex of drones (unmanned automated vehicles) would be male. In line with the masculine ideologies of militarism, in which anxieties and insecurities are bolstered by phallic identifications and the stigmatisation of female bodies and femininity, the drone would be another metaphorically masculine military technology. In contrast, however, the piloting or 'riding' of the drone, which involves male and female pilots, suggests a more complex gendering of this 'assemblage'. Tracing a series of interactions and genderings of drones and their preceding technological forms this inquiry aims to unsettle the 'security' of gender.

Benjamin Noys is Professor of Critical Theory at the University of Chichester. He is author of *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (2000), *The Culture of Death* (2005), *The Persistence of the Negative* (2010), and *Malign Velocities* (2014). He has also recently published the article 'Drone Metaphysics' – available here:

https://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/595/602

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The Sex of Drones

Professor Benjamin Noys (2017)

What is the sex of the drone (the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle)? **[Slide 1]** The answer might appear obvious: male. The technology of the drone appears to obviously belong to the patriarchal regime of military technology and to the phallic fantasy of the extension of male power into killing at a distance. **[Slide 2]** This fantasy is given form in a strange comment by Samuel Beckett's character Murphy, from the 1938 novel of that name: 'But how much more pleasant was the sensation of being a missile without provenance of target, caught up in a tumult of non-Newtonian motion. So pleasant that pleasant was not the word' (1973: 66). 'So pleasant that pleasant was not the word' seems to speak to this enjoyment, in Lacanian-speak this *jouissance*, that the power of the missile to roam induces. If anxiety appears here it does so in the notion of technology as compensation and supplement to male power, which implies a potential impotence that must be overcome and denied in the power of technology.

Here, however, I want to explore the complexity of the gendering of the drone and some of the forms of anxiety (and compensation for anxiety) this induces. This concern was prompted by an article from 2015 concerning a female drone pilot Anne, codename 'Sparkle', the codename or nickname due to the fact she has jewels attached to her headband and earpieces. **[Slide 1]** I want to return in more detail to

this article later, but for obvious reasons something about the way the article positions femininity in relation to the drone, as evident from the tagline image, prompted my interest in exploring further this aspect of the drone. **[Slide 3]** The drone is, ironically, 'unmanned' (or 'acephalic' as Ramon Bloomberg notes (2015:1)), and so the gendering of the drone already takes on a more complex path in terms of the piloting of the drone.[1] **[Slide 4]** It is this sense of the drone as 'assemblage', as arrangement of human and nonhuman elements, which I want to consider in relation to gender.

Framing the Fantasy

Before moving on to this analysis I do, however, want to make some remarks on why I am carrying out this analysis and my 'method' (not a word I am that comfortable with). I originally came to write on drones at the invitation of Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood of the University of Lincoln. They organised a day conference on drones, titled 'As Above, So Below', on 24 May 2015. **[Slide 5]** This was due, in part, to piloting of UK military drones from RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. I was asked to contribute to the conference and then to the resulting journal issue due to my work on 'accelerationism'. In brief, 'accelerationism' today refers to a number of tendencies that aim to promote or develop the repurposing of capitalist technologies in new anti-capitalist forms. For this reason they resist and decry what they regard as the 'technophobia' of the left, what they commonly call 'folk politics', and embrace forces and forms of abstraction as the condition of a new radical politics. **[Slide 6]** I

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[1] This letter from the *Socialist Worker*, which it is difficult not to read as ironic, makes the point:

Mind your language
Simon Assaf's article on Syria (30 March, *Socialist Worker*) was illuminating.
However his use of the phrase "unmanned drones" is problematic.
Changing how we speak will not get rid of oppression. But that's not an excuse not to avoid gendered language.
Hanif Leylabi, Newcastle

have been critical of this tendency and in my 2014 book *Malign Velocities* I tried to trace the origins of these ideas through a number of avant-garde movements, from the Italian Futurists to Detroit Techno.

In particular one of the concerns of my analysis was the tendency of accelerationism to engage in fantasies of merging and melding with technological forms. It was this point of analysis that I would develop in my discussion of drones to probe what I called 'drone metaphysics' – the metaphysical and theological resonances that have surrounded the discourse on drones. My argument was that these discourses were not just embellishments but supplementary in the sense Derrida suggests of necessary. Drones, as a socio-technical assemblage or 'networked drone' (Bloomberg 2015: 17), generate certain forms of theological and metaphysical thinking, especially around sight. In particular, therefore, I suggested there was a role for theoretical or philosophical thinking in probing these discourses.

I traced this 'metaphysics' in pre-drone discourses to suggest the persistence of these fantasies into our drone present. Today, focusing on gender, I wish to continue that probe. My suggestion is that the fantasies attached to drones are also not simply external elements, but frames or matrices in which we inhabit drone discourse. In line with some of Freud's speculations, see especially his 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919), fantasy is a *structure* rather than a by-product of existing forms (Freud 1979: 163–193). So, my suggestion is that the fantasies attached to drones are not merely attachments, but structures or forms by which we are inserted into drone discourse. Here I will be exploring that mode of 'insertion' particularly around the issues of how we pilot or 'ride' the drone and how this positioning results in certain effects of gendering.

Unmanned

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I want to begin from the assumption that the drone is male. **[Slide 7]** At the most obvious level the drone appears as a phallic object, with a typical phallic bulb (containing the sensors). In general discourse the drone is also metaphorically referred to as 'he' or 'male'. **[Slide 8]** The USAF describes the Predator as a 'Tier II' MALE UAS (medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aircraft system). This image is captioned: **[Slide 9]** 'The Predator has no pilot, and is controlled for *his* highly secret mission from Las Vegas.' (my emphasis). **[Slide 10]** We should also note, however, that the drone is horizontal, and so unlike the classically phallic V2 and other rockets (if not missiles).

Another reason to regard the drone as male is the confused etymology of the drone relating to the drone bee (Bloomberg 2015: 2-3). There is debate whether 'drone' refers to the sound of the weapon or, more specifically, to the resemblance to the drone male honeybee. **[Slide 11]** The male honeybee has one role: to mate with the queen, after which, 'Should a drone succeed in mating he soon dies because the penis and associated abdominal tissues are ripped from the drone's body after sexual intercourse.'[2] The drone bee is hardly the representative of masculine power, but rather of sexual superfluity. Ramon Bloomberg (2015), notes that 'the drone was recognised as a boring bee, complacent, and satisfied with his lot, namely, the sexual pursuit of a virgin queen and the certain death which followed.' **[Slide 12]** Bloomberg has also traced how Western political discourse, from Virgil to Thomas More, has used the beehive as metaphor for human political organisation and the male drone as representative of non-work: 'the lazy yawning drone', as Shakespeare puts in it *Henry V* (Bloomberg, 2015: 7).

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_(bee)

Even here the masculine identification does not appear to be one, exactly, of power but, again, of excess or superfluity. This is reinforced by the fact that the drone is an *unmanned* vehicle. Paul Virilio had already noted, in 1984, how the impact of new technological forms of warfare meant that 'The disintegration of the warrior's personality is at a very advanced stage' (1989: 84). Discussing a recent series of techno-thrillers organized around drone warfare, Nathan K. Hensley remarks on how they 'work yet more erratically to recapture, and paint in bright colors, the heroic male agency that drone war erodes in its very structure' (2016). **[Slide 13]** In the case of Mike Maden's thriller *Drone*, a 'masculine fantasia' according to Hensley, this 'recovery' of virility is achieved by ending the novel with a scene of hand-to-hand combat and killing to exorcise the 'unmanning' of distance killing by drone.[3]

We should not and never forget the other element of the drone assemblage: the victim. Here, again, a malign dynamic of anxiety and masculinization plays out. This time it concerns the identification of the potential victim as a 'military-aged male' to authorize the drone strike. Let's take one heavily-documented example, recounted by Derek Gregory, concerning a drone operation on 21 February 2010 in Uruzgan province, central Afghanistan, tracking three vehicles suspected of holding Taliban fighters. **[Slide 14]** A Predator drone operator in the United States identified the people in the vehicles as holding 'cylindrical objects' they 'hoped' were rifles.

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[3] 'But a short epilogue, literally an addendum to the novel, exorcises any worry that this new form of killing isn't quite manly enough. "I kill you with my bare hands," Pearce explains to his enemy and to us, after bursting in to settle his final score. In this tacked-on, masculinity-saving scene—an actual and not just Derridean supplement—the remote killings, proxy agency, and murders by pushbutton resolve at last into *mano a mano*, the cagefighter standing against his rival (now Russian) to banish the specter of mediated war in favor of The Real Thing. The sequence works hard to recapture (as compensatory fantasy) exactly the direct agency that drone war makes impossible. The scene is a blaze of active verbs and phallic knifework' (Hensley 2016)

Lacking a positive identification, the drone operator claimed the truck 'would make a beautiful target':

> When an image analyst identified 'at least one child' the pilot objected that he was 'so quick to call [expletive] kids but not to call a [expletive] rifle', and the sensor operator agreed: 'I really doubt that children call . . . I really [expletive] hate that.' (Gregory, 2011: 201)

Two Kiowa attack helicopters were called in.

> The Predator pilot told the JTAC that the image analysts had identified 21 'military aged males' and 'two possible children'; when asked if these were teenagers or toddlers they were described as 'potential adolescents . . . early teens', and the JTAC agreed that '12-13 years old with a weapon is just as dangerous'. (Gregory 2011: 202)

At 0915 the helicopters were cleared to engage. They fired. After the smoke cleared,

> 'Nobody is talking to me,' said the pilot. The sensor operator zoomed in to see 'a guy who looks like he's wearing jewelry and stuff like a girl, but he ain't . . .' Eight minutes later women and children were identified, but too late. 'That lady is carrying a kid', says the pilot, and the sensor operator agreed: 'Right there in the crosshairs.' They consoled themselves that they could not have known: 'No way to tell from here.' (Gregory 2011: 202)

Subsequent reports identified at least 23 people dead and more than a dozen wounded, including three children: all civilians (Gregory, 2011: 202). **[Slide 15]**

We have a 'symmetrical' attempt at making masculine, in terms of the masculinization of the pilot of the drone, threatened with 'unmanning', and in terms to the victim, in which being a 'man' is the condition of the exercise of violence. This

pseudo-symmetry is, of course, the justification for asymmetrical violence conditioned by this play of identification, of 'seeing as an attack' (Huyssen 1993: 15).

Female 'Manning'

One of the moments of the conjunction of the drone with femininity, even a primal scene, is noted by Adam Rothstein in his book *Drone*: **[Slide 16]**

> In an interesting coincidence, a woman named Norma Jeane Dougherty – who would later become known as Marilyn Monroe – would be discovered by a *Stars and Stripes* photographer as she assembled a Radioplane model RP-5 in the company's Los Angeles Plant (2015: 27).

Paul Virilio had earlier noted the connection between Marilyn Monroe and the military: **[Slide 17]**

> Again it is no accident that one of the last stars, Marilyn Monroe, was discovered by a US army photographer at the height of the Korean War. Nicknamed Miss Flamethrower (itself reminiscent of Marinetti's 'flame-women', 'lightening-carriages', 'engine-heart' and similar couplings), she earned 150 dollars a week and became the most popular pin-up on barrack-room walls. (1989: 25)[4]

These might be thought to be chance conjunctions, mere exterior moments that add that necessary heterosexuality to the homosocial form which much militarism takes.

I want to return to the case of 'Sparkle' the female drone pilot. **[Slide 18]** The article presents itself as a behind-the-scenes examination of drone pilots and presents itself as critical of drone operations. It does, however, follow a typical narrative of 'humanization', in terms of putting a face on the faceless pattern of drone operations. In Javier Marías's *The Infatuations* (2013), the central character and focal

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[4] http://www.marilynmonroe.ca/camera/mags/life52.htm

consciousness of the novel, María Dolz, ponders a series of unpunished crimes, which includes 'the bombing of civilians by our aircraft with no pilot and therefore no face' (2013: 231). Lack of a face implies lack of moral responsibility, but putting a face to the pilots does not necessarily imply imputing responsibility so much as occluding the lives of victims (Stahl, 2013: 670–71; Gregory, 2011: 204). In this case the face is feminized precisely through the image that heads the article and through the 'sparkle' of the 'bedazzled headset'. Anne reflects on this 'sparkle':

> "I use it to emasculate the enemy in the afterlife," Sparkle said. "Many radical jihadists believe that being killed by a woman means they will not enter heaven. Considering how they treat their women, I'm OK with rubbing salt in the wound." (in Maurer 2015)

This justification is an almost classic example of 'imperial feminism', the justification of violence on the colonial other justified in the name of a feminist intervention. Present since the 19th century this justification has played an increasing role in 'humanitarian' justifications of imperial violence that have characterized the 'war on terror'.

In Donna Haraway's terminology (2016: 68), this is a cyborg not a goddess, but also a kind of 'cyborg goddess' administering 'justice' from the sky. It is the nightmare inversion of the promise of Haraway's socialist-feminist integration of the woman and the machine into a new war machine. While conceding the intimacy that drone surveillance gives with the target, Sparkle also turns to the usual justification of violence by identification with American forces: 'They are always associated with some part of hurting our friendly forces. At the end of the day, when you boil it down to that one point, the rest of it goes out the window.'[5] Talking of the aftermath of one

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[5] Derek Gregory notes:
> When officers at Creech argued that 'the amount of time spent surveilling an area' from a UAV creates 'a greater sense of intimacy' than is possible

strike and watching a man slowly die due to his injuries, Sparkle reflects 'You can't be that soft girly traditional feminine and do the job. Those are the people who are going to have the nightmares.' Here 'hardening' and masculinization is an operation carried out on the self to resist trauma. Femininity is denied ('soft girly') at the level of violence, while reasserted, as we have seen, through imperial feminism. Patrick Chamayou has suggested that the emphasis on drone operators suffering post-traumatic stress disorders is a way to give forms of heroism to the anti-heroic nature of drone warfare – trauma providing the justification of combat, or 'a veneer of humanity to an instrument of mechanical murder'.[6] Again in the case of Sparkle this experience is feminized *and* masculinized: 'Sparkle says she cried as she watched an Afghan man drag his wife out in the courtyard and beat her. She wanted to shoot, but couldn't, so when she does have the chance to fire, she doesn't hesitate.' (in Mauner, 2015) Trauma is acknowledged, but as a driver for further violence, as the sublation of femininity into a new mode of technological violence.

Riding the Drone

Great Gods cannot ride little horses (Haitian proverb)

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from conventional aircraft, they were describing not their familiarity with the 'human terrain' of Afghanistan but their identification of – and crucially *with* – American troops in the battlespace. (2011: 200)

[6] For a critical discussion of this claim see:

https://geographicalimaginations.com/2013/08/13/theory-of-the-drone-9-psychopathologies-of-the-drone/

I want now to explore further this effect of piloting or 'riding' the drone and the effects of gendering that it induces. Daniel Bell, in his 1976 work *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, noted that 'In the evolution of technocratic thinking, things began to ride men' (1999: 352). The (masculine) dominance of technology, Freud's 'prosthetic Gods', are strangely unmanned by the things they create (a point also made by Marx). Paul Virilio has offered speculations on technology as forms of 'metabolic vehicle', in which women's bodies formed the first 'vehicle' for the warrior. He argues that women provide the logistical support for the male warrior as well as the means of reproduction (Virilio 1989: 93, n.21). Whatever the truth of this speculative assertion, we can see something to Virilio's argument that the metabolic vehicle 'carries' the warrior and his further suggestion that the power of the military caste lies in their ability to move from body to body as disembodied 'souls'. This is the metempsychosis of the warrior. What I want to suggest, however, is this mobility and movement does not only produce effects of virility and masculinization, but also different modes of gendering and engendering. I want to trace a few instances in pre-drone discourse to explore this problem.

[Slide 19] First is Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, set during World War Two the novel is structured by the V-2 Rocket launches from Germany. Its central character is Tyrone Slothrop, who was subject to Pavlovian conditioning as infant, sensitising him sexually to the mysterious plastic Impolex G. This plastic is used in the German V-2 rockets and thanks to his conditioning results in pre-strike erections and sexual encounters for Slothrop. The conditioning makes Slothrop a machine controlled by the influence of his conditioning: 'erection hums … like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost' (Pynchon 1975: 285). In this way the V-2 strikes can be tracked via Slothrop's sexual

encounters. **[Slide 20]** What interests me here, however, is the passenger. The V-2s were pilotless missiles, but in the novel the Nazi Captain Blicero puts his lover Gottfried, who he has subjected to masochistic and incestuous rituals, into a special compartment in the V-2 while clothed in a shroud of Impolex-G. Gottfried becomes the first missile passenger but, of course, in this passive, masochistic, and 'homosexualized' state. The 'phallic' V-2 is the staging for a rite, even what Jung regarded as the 'rebirth through incest' (see Kerslake 2004).

My next example, chronological in terms of reference if not in terms of production, is from Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr Strangelove*. **[Slide 21]** Here I refer to the well-known scene in which Major T. J. 'King' Kong, played by Slim Pickens, is struggling to release a nuclear bomb trapped in the bomb bay and ends up 'riding' the bomb down to detonation. In the scene Kong rides the bomb in reverse cowgirl, appropriately waving his cowboy hat. Kubrick would later confirm that this scene was a scene of the 'last spasm' of sexual release.[7] At the same time, we can note again the sexual ambiguity of 'riding' the bomb (compared to this 'more traditional' image and the whole genre of pin-up girl/bomb from bomber nose cone illustrations **[Slide 22]**). Once again, we have a certain paradox of gendering, in which the release of the phallic weapon produces another de-gendering effect, at least by usual heteronormative understandings, of the 'pilot' of the weapon.

These instances suggest other 'plays' between 'manning' and 'unmanning' and the zones of gender and sexual ambiguity and anxiety that exist around these weapons. They provide a matrix of fantasy in which the 'rider' is inserted into the fantasy scenario in a range of potential positions often, as we have seen, more passive than active. This does not, however, simply serve to disrupt or subvert the weapon,

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[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr._Strangelove#Sexual_themes

but allows different forms of the deployment of the drone or missile through the fantasy frame.

Drone as Assemblage

To conclude, we might return to those arguments that stress that the drone is an 'assemblage' or 'network': part of a range of devices, discourses and subjectivities that compose the 'drone' as object. This line of thought is common enough and illuminating about the formation of bodies and subjectivities. **[Slide 23]** Reflecting on the broader concept of the 'kill-chain', of which the drone is merely one element, Derek Gregory writes: 'The kill-chain can be thought of as a dispersed and distributed apparatus, a congeries of actors, objects, practices, discourses and affects, that entrains the people who are made part of it and constitutes them as particular kinds of subjects' (2011: 196). Here what is crucial for my discussion is this 'entraining' of people, which constitutes them 'as particular kinds of subjects'. As I have been tracing this involves a gendering (and de-gendering), which traces a particular anxiety concerning passivity or 'riding', identified with femininity, and an anxiety to be answered by merging into an apparatus of violence in which that violence produces a compensatory 'activity', identified with masculinity.

[Slide 24] Similarly, discussing the network drone, Ramon Bloomberg had suggested that: 'The drone is not the thing itself, the remotely piloted object. Rather the drone is a *thickness* in which bodies are juggled, so to speak, guided and held aloft' (2015: 18; emphasis in original). Here bodies are 'held aloft' in a new kind of medium, a 'thickness', we might we reminded of Marx's word, or that or his translators, 'coagulation', which is used to refer to the insertion and merging of abstract labour with the object produced as a commodity (see Sutherland 2008). This

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thickening also distributes certain modes of fantasy and gender identification in the ways in which these bodies are 'juggled' and 'held aloft', again suggesting an experience of passivity entwined with the activity of killing. Again, this 'thickening' also has its corollary in the fate of victims of drone strikes. Derek Gregory quotes Joe Pugliese on the 'shredded carnality' that results from the use of hellfire missiles (originally anti-tank weapons) and cruise missiles in drone strikes.[8]

I would suggest that these analyses, which stress the 'entraining' of people and the 'thickness' that results be read not simply as the claim that an 'assemblage' is therefore easy to undo. There is an effect of re-reification at work, but that does not suppose that we are simply able to deconstruct the drone to remove these effects. The brief analysis I have sketched aims to add to these types of analysis an emphasis on gender and anxiety as things are sutured within certain forms of drone discourse. This is a starting point. My suggestion is that the 'anxiety' attached to the abolition or absorption of the (male) subject within the drone is not in itself enough to secure a critical discourse. Rather, critique, if that is what we intend, has to negotiate with the 'thickness' or 'congeries' that coagulate forms of gender and de-gendering *within* the assemblage.

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[8] https://geographicalimaginations.com/2017/02/08/meatspace/

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